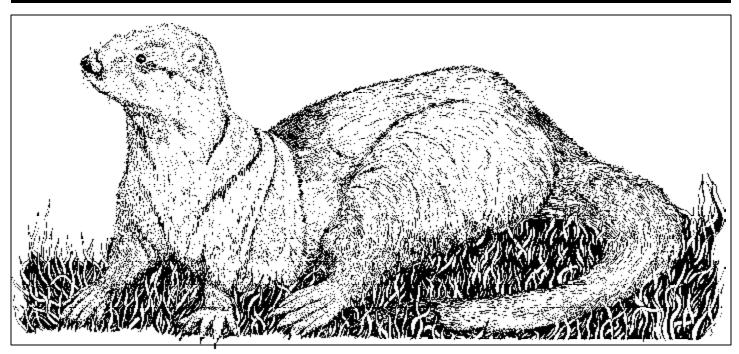
River Otter

(Lutra canadensis)



River otters are semi-aquatic mammals known for their playful behavior. They are members of the weasel family, Mustelidae, which also includes badgers, mink, skunks, pine marten and sea otters. The average life span of river otters in their natural environment is estimated to be 10 to 15 years. They were once one of the most wide-spread mammals in North America, occurring throughout all major waterways, including most of those in Utah. Habitat degradation, water pollution and unregulated trapping during early settlement of the continent reduced or eliminated river otters from much of their range. Now with the help of reintroduction efforts and improved habitat quality, otters are making a comeback in Utah.

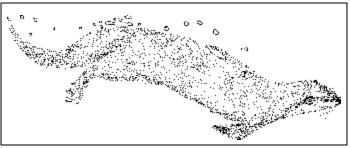
Description

River otters are sleek animals with long, slender, "torpedo-shaped" bodies adapted for swimming. They have a rich, dark brown coat of short, thick, waterproof fur. Air that is trapped within the fur acts as insulation when the otter is submerged. The area around the face may be light brown to silver-gray and is covered with sensitive facial whiskers which help otters to detect and capture prey in turbid water. Otters have small eyes located high on their head and nearly even with their ears. This placement allows otters to swim low in the water with only the tops of their heads above the surface. When underwater, their ears are closed by a series of ridges.

Otters are able to conserve oxygen and stay submerged for approximately 4 minutes. They also have short, powerful legs, webbed feet and rudder-like tails which help them to steer.

Otters may weigh from 10 to 30 pounds and range in length from 35 to 52 inches, including the tail which is about 1/3 of the total body length. The tail is nearly as wide as the body at the base and tapers to the tip.

Otters are sometimes confused with muskrats, mink or beaver. They can be distinguished from muskrats and mink by size because otters are considerably larger. Muskrats also have round, shorter, scaly tails, unlike the otter's large, furred tail. Although beavers and otters are similar in overall size, beavers have large, scaly, flat tails, larger and longer feet and swim with their ears more erect. When alarmed, beavers will often slap their tails on the surface of the water, unlike otters.



Habitat

River otters are always found near water, occupying aquatic habitats ranging from fast flowing cool streams to slow or non-flowing wetland areas. They are usually found in higher densities in areas with adjacent wetlands and backwaters, such as oxbows. They are very sensitive to chemical pollutants and so will not be found in areas of poor water quality. Important characteristics of good otter habitat include year-round open water, densely wooded riparian cover along the banks and abundant prey. Fallen trees, logjams, rock piles and other structure within the stream channel are favorable because they provide good habitat for fish, the otters' main prey. The presence of beavers is thought to be important as well because beaver activity tends to improve otter habitat. Beavers increase the amount of stream structure by cutting trees that fall into the water and by creating food caches of tree limbs underwater. By building dams, beavers create deep, productive pools that stabilize water levels and slow water currents, improving conditions for many prey species. Slower water currents also allow more sediment to settle, making the

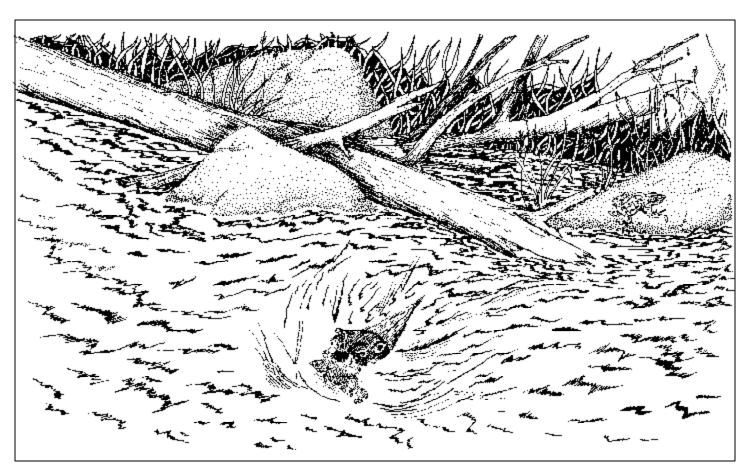
water clearer. This makes it easier for otters to see and catch their prey.

Food Habits

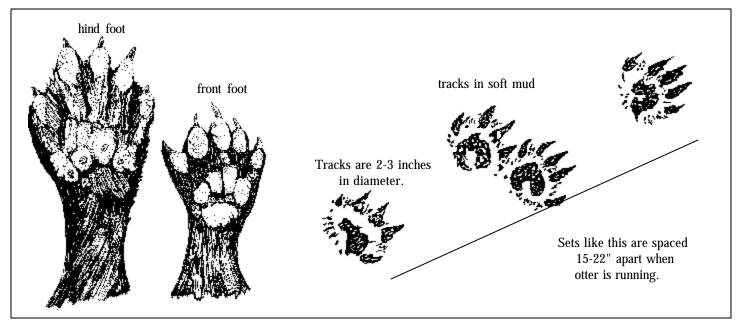
River otters are opportunistic carnivores that feed primarily on fish, crayfish and frogs. During the winter, the otters typically prey on fish, most often catching slower-swimming, medium sized fish, such as suckers and carp. During summer months, otters may prey more on crayfish and frogs because they are more easily captured.

Den Sites

River otters do not dig or build their own dens but instead use old beaver lodges, logjams, tree root cavities, jumbles of loose rock or bank dens dug by beavers or muskrats. Dens are used for resting, sleeping and rearing young. An otter's home range will contain many sites that an otter may use as a den. A den may be used just once when an otter passes through an area, or it may be used for several months before the otter moves to another den.



Fallen or partly submerged trees, logjams and rock piles provide shelter and foraging areas for both river otters and their prey. Riparian areas which include cavities among tree roots, dense shrubs and tall grass provide cover and resting sites for otters.



Otter Sign

Otters leave a variety of distinctive sign, including tracks, slide marks and droppings. Their tracks, usually found on muddy banks, are 2 to 3 inches in diameter, and their stride length is 15 to 22 inches. Otters have 5 toes on both the front and rear feet, with webbing between the toes. When otters travel in snow or on ice, they often will alternately run and slide on their bellies up to 20 feet, leaving a distinct furrow through the snow. During the winter, otter tracks may be seen on the ice, disappearing into open pools of water.

Otter droppings, called "scat," consist almost entirely of hard, bony material from fish and crayfish, including fish scales, fish and frog bones and crayfish shells. Their scat is often deposited repeatedly at the same area, called a "latrine" site. These latrine sites typically are located where rocks or logs protrude into the water, where tributaries intersect the main stream or body of water or along shallow banks where otters climb out of the water.

Reproduction

River otters do not breed until they are 2 years of age. Breeding usually occurs in early spring, and the young are not born until the following spring. A process called delayed implantation causes the embryo to stop growing shortly after fertilization. Its development stops for approximately 10 months and begins again about 8 weeks before the young are born. Breeding occurs again soon after the young are born, and the cycle is repeated. Otters can have up to 6 young, called pups, but litter sizes usually number between 2 and 4. Otter pups stay with their mother for almost one year, leaving just before the next litter is born.

Behavior

River otters are inquisitive and extremely active animals. They may be active at all times of the day but are most active around sunrise and sunset. They may be seen individually, in family groups or with otters outside the family group. The number of otters in an area depends on habitat quality, food availability, time of year, and the sex and age distribution of the population.

Otters are probably most known for their seemingly carefree, playful behavior. They are often portrayed repeatedly sliding down mud or snow embankments on their bellies, apparently for no reason other than for fun. This play behavior, however, is usually limited to only the younger animals; and, even then, very little of their time is actually spent engaged in this activity.

Historical Status in Utah

Early records in Utah indicate that river otters originally inhabited most major waterways in the state, including the Raft, Weber, Provo, Bear, Green and Colorado river drainages. They have been legally protected since 1899, when Utah's Fish and Game Commission first reported that otter populations were becoming rare. Despite that protection, very few otters were sighted for many years. It was not until 1978 that positive sightings of otters were again being reported in Utah, most from the Green, Raft and Colorado rivers. Recently, otters have also been observed in the Weber, Provo and Sevier river drainages. It is believed that poor water quality, poor riparian habitat and variable water flow in many of Utah's streams and rivers have kept otters from becoming re-established throughout the state.

Current Status and Management

River otters are protected by the Utah Wildlife Code, and trapping and hunting of river otters are prohibited. In 1989, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources initiated a river otter reintroduction program with the goal of establishing a permanent, genetically viable population of otters in Utah. Federal land management agencies, private groups and Utah citizens have contributed to this cooperative project. Otters have been obtained from other states with stable otter populations and released along the Green River. Nine river otters were released during 1989, and 14 were released in 1990. The Green River was selected because it has extensive undisturbed riparian cover, abundant prey, high water quality and established beaver populations in the drainage. Additional river otter releases are planned. Many of these introduced otters will be implanted with radio transmitters to enable biologists to monitor survival, home range sizes, movements and reproduction rates. Monitoring the otters using radio telemetry will also help biologists examine habitat needs and identify factors which may be limiting survival rates.

What You Can Do

Please report all sightings or evidence of river otters in Utah to the Division of Wildlife Resources. Also, please report any accidental captures or roadkills involving river otters. This information will help document the distribution of the animals throughout the state.

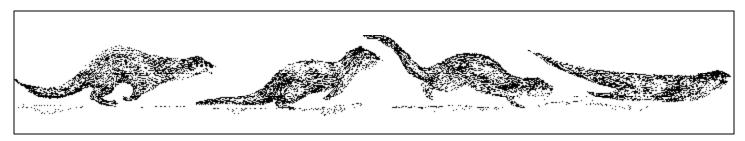
You can contribute to wildlife through the Wildlife Tax Check-off on the Utah State Income Tax forms or by making a contribution to the Watchable Wildlife Program, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, 1594 West North Temple, Suite 2110, Salt Lake City, UT 84116.

Additional Reading

Murie, Olaus. *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks*. The Peterson Field Guide Series. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1974.

Chapman, J., and George Feldhamer, editors. *Wild Mammals of North America*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982.

Zeveloff, Samuel. *Mammals of the Intermountain West*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1988.



Written by Ken McDonald, Wildlife Biologist; edited by Brenda Schussman; and illustrated by Ellen Petrick-Underwood. (Images may not be reproduced



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You may also become involved in the "Adopt-An-Otter" Program. The re-establishment of river otters in Utah is being funded through donations to the "Adopt-An-Otter" Program, sponsored by the Nongame Section of the Division of Wildlife Resources. If you would like more information about Utah's river otters or if you would like to make a donation to help establish river otters in Utah, contact the Utah Divison of Wildlife Resources, "Adopt-An-Otter" Program, 1594 West North Temple, Suite 2110, Salt Lake City, UT 84116.